



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Reviewing Stand

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Our Housing Problem — Rent Control

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

TIGHE WOODS

National Housing Expediter

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Broadcast continuously since 1934 by Northwestern University



THE REVIEWING STAND is a weekly radio forum presented by Northwestern University. The program was first broadcast by Station WGN, Chicago, October 14, 1934. It has been on the air continuously since that time, originating in the WGN studios, and, since 1935, carried by the stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System. **THE REVIEWING STAND** presents members of the Northwestern University faculty and distinguished guests from business, government, education, and the press in round table discussions of contemporary problems—the questions that are in the news. The program is under the direction of James H. McBurney, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University; Miss Myrtle Stahl, Director of Educational Programs, WGN, Chicago; R. E. Buchanan, Public Relations Director of Radio, Northwestern University; Mrs. Kathryn Johnson, Assistant Director, and Ed Keath, Program Director.

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Our Housing Problem — Rent Control

MR. BUCHANAN: What should we do about rent control?

MR. HUEBENTHAL: Rent control since the close of the war has failed in its purpose. Rent control should be eliminated at the earliest possible moment.

MR. MYER: Rent control should be extended and intensified. Teeth should be put into the law so that it can be more effectively enforced.

WGN ANNOUNCER: Northwestern University, in cooperation with the Mutual Broadcasting System, presents the *Reviewing Stand*, a program in its fifteenth year on the air. Today the *Reviewing Stand* concludes its series of two discussions on housing, with the pertinent topic, *Our Housing Problem—Rent Control*.

Our unrehearsed, give-and-take discussion will center around the availability of rental units, crowded or spacious living conditions, and the dispute over rent control.

MR. BUCHANAN: In continuing our two-program series on housing, we turn to rent control, and rent control is a topic on which opinions are antithetical and vehement.

This week we have been flooded with letters and postal cards which alternately scream out against landlords and government. The landlord claims that restrictions not only pare down his fair profit but sometimes cause him to sustain a loss. Those paying rent believe that they are, in certain instances, being gouged for the profit of the owner and that only government restriction can protect them.

Rent Control Hinders Housing

Mr. Heubenthal, you say that rent control has failed and that it should be eliminated at the earliest possible moment. Do you think that is possible under present housing conditions?

MR. HUEBENTHAL: The only commodity shortage in the postwar economy is the shortage of rental housing, which is the only commodity that is still under control. Now, I submit, the way to lick a housing shortage is to produce the thing that we are short of. And I say two things: Rent control has subtracted from our present supply of rental housing; and secondly, rent control stifles the building of new apartments. When you subtract from your supply and do not build new apartments, your shortage will be, and necessarily must be, intensified.

MR. BUCHANAN: On the other hand, Mr. Myer, you think that rent control should not only be extended, but should be strengthened. Why do you believe that?

What About Voluntary Controls?

MR. MYER: So long as there is this terrible housing shortage in a commodity which takes up at least 19 or 20 per cent of the average family's budget, there is a natural tendency for rents to rise to a point where the average family cannot afford to live in a decent house. Something has to be done about that kind of a situation. Therefore, there must be controls in order that rents be kept at a position where the average family can afford a decent house. There is no other known way of doing that except the control of rents, until such a time as the housing shortage is licked. And the housing situation has to be licked by other means. Rent control will not do it.

MR. BUCHANAN: I assume, then, you think that voluntary controls are impossible?

MR. MYER: The record has already shown that voluntary controls are im-

possible. In those instances where there has been decontrol of any part of housing commodities, voluntary controls have been ineffective because rents have risen way out of line with what they have been heretofore. That has already been proved.

MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Huebenthal, in general, I think, you might disagree. What would be your answer to Mr. Myer's statement?

MR. HUEBENTHAL: Mr. Myer states that there is a housing shortage, and I want to clear my thinking on that problem so Mr. and Mrs. America can make up their own minds.

Now let us get clear on this: The housing shortage is being dissipated rapidly in all except the so-called *medium* rent accommodations. Figures for the Chicago Metropolitan district show some vacancy now in houses, rooms, apartment hotels, suites, and in hotels—in fact, in every class of residential unit except rent-controlled unfurnished rental units. Now, 15 months ago all of these classifications of space were 100 per cent occupied with a substantial backlog of unhoused tenants.

In the *Market Letter* of the Real Estate Research Corporation for February, 1949 I notice this comment: "The situation is precisely as though some one meat packer was forced by law to pack and sell bacon at 35c per pound, while other packers sold at 70c per pound. Naturally, there would be a shortage of the 35c bacon."

And that is the shortage we are talking about here—medium-priced rental units.

What Is Government's Role?

MR. BUCHANAN: In talking about the housing shortage, we have a general representation of how the realtor or the landlord may feel and how the tenant may feel. I would like to know what part the government, especially those sections of government concerned with housing administration, has in rent control.

Tighe Woods, Federal Housing Ex-

pediter, is ready to answer that question. Here is his transcribed comment from Washington, D.C.

MR. WOODS: For the past two weeks I have been appearing before Congressional committees to present evidence for the administration on the urgent need for the continuation and strengthening of rent control.

First, I have recommended that rent control be continued for two years through March 31, 1951. A two-year extension is necessary because all the information available shows that we cannot possibly lick the critical housing shortage in anything less than that time. I might also point out that we cannot lick the housing shortage in two years unless we as a nation take bold, vigorous steps to produce the housing our people need at prices they can afford to pay.

'Controls Necessary Now'

The only reason for maintaining rent control is the very serious shortage of housing. With an overwhelming demand for the limited supply of housing there is a powerful continuing upward pressure on rents. That upward pressure will diminish as housing is produced to meet this demand, and rent control can be removed. When the shortage is licked, we can eliminate the controls entirely.

As you know, there have been conflicting reports about the seriousness of the housing problem throughout the country. To get the hard facts on the situation I have had housing surveys made in about 1,000 counties where rent control is in effect. These surveys disclosed there was an adequate supply of housing in only 27 communities. In accordance with our policy to abolish controls where the need for rental housing has been reasonably met, I eliminated the controls in these areas.

In order to obtain all of the information that might possibly be available on the housing shortage, we also made special surveys in 91 major cities. We asked community leaders who knew local conditions to give us

estimates of the housing needs of their people. We asked city officials, housing authorities, real estate boards, veterans' organizations, welfare agencies, employers, civic organizations, and other responsible citizens and groups. A conservative estimate indicates that there is an immediate need, right now, for more than one million rental dwelling units in these 91 cities alone. In some of these cities there are houses for sale, and in a very few cases there are houses for rent, but virtually all of them are priced right out of the reach of the majority of families. Expensive houses for sale do not meet the need for rental housing. And, therefore, unless we produce rental housing at prices people can afford, rent control must be continued.

When I asked Congress to extend rent control, I also asked that the present rent controls be strengthened in several ways.

'Control Must Be Enforcible'

On January 27th the *Kansas City Star* summed up the proposed changes objectively and clearly as follows: "The main changes proposed are to close the loopholes and to make rent controls enforceable. People who have lived up to the intentions of the existing law have no reason for a special quarrel with the proposed new law."

Clear evidence of the loopholes in the present law appears in surveys made by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. For example, in Philadelphia, the B.L.S. found that over-ceiling rents were being charged on one of every four units checked. The average overcharge was 34 per cent.

Similar surveys have been made in the areas around eight military establishments throughout the country, where it was found that there were overcharges in rent and illegal reductions in essential services in one of every five of all the dwelling units that were checked. These violations are due mainly to our agency's lack of authority to regulate evictions, to sue for treble damages where a tenant has been overcharged, and to apply

fines or imprisonment in cases of repeated willful violations.

Our recommendations for strengthening the law do not conflict in any way with our policy of granting increases in rent to landlords who are operating at a loss or whose operating expenses have gone up. I will speak more about that in a moment.

We are asking Congress to give our agency the right to regulate evictions because the threat of eviction is now being used as a means of forcing many tenants to pay illegal rents. From our local area rent directors all over the country I have received report after report saying that tenants do not file complaints about overcharge in rent because they are afraid of being evicted. We cannot have effective rent control without effective control over evictions.

'Need More Teeth in Law'

We are asking Congress to give us the right to sue for treble damages, because the present law does not provide adequate protection to tenants against overcharges. Under the existing law, if a tenant is overcharged, our agency can only request that the amount of the overcharge be restored. This is almost an open invitation to charge more than the ceiling rent. The law *does* permit a tenant to sue for three times the amount of the overcharge, but most tenants are afraid to take such action for fear they will be blacklisted and will be unable to find a place to live.

The present law also provides no protection against willful and flagrant violators. In order to prevent willful violations the law must provide for fine and imprisonment when necessary.

As I said a moment ago, these recommendations do not in any way affect our policy of granting increases in rent to landlords. Since rent control went into effect, more than 1,700,000 increases in rent have been granted to landlords. A recent check of our rent offices shows that we are currently approving 73 per cent of all landlord petitions for increases in rent, and

that these increases are averaging almost 20 per cent.

As I told Congress, it is just as important to give landlords equitable adjustments and compensate them adequately for any increased costs of operation in the rental housing business as it is to obtain compliance with the federal law. But until the nationwide critical need for rental housing is met, we must have a rent control law. And that law must be a law that can be enforced to protect the interests of tenants and landlords alike.

WOL ANNOUNCER: Thank you, Mr. Woods.

To continue our discussion we return you now to Chicago.

MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Woods, in his transcribed statement, was specific in his view that rent control must be continued. What do you think of his arguments, Mr. Huebenthal?

'More of the Same'

MR. HUEBENTHAL: I think that means more of the same.

Now as to Mr. Woods, let me say this: Words may show a man's wit, but actions his meaning.

Let's look at the statement that landlords can get an increase in rent on certain things—taxes, fuel, utilities furnished, and insurance. That sounds to me as if we would say in a corresponding situation to labor, for instance: We are going to pay you 1941 wages, but we will allow for the increased cost of an overcoat, sweet rolls, eye glasses, and tooth paste. Now, that is the same thing that we have been getting, and it is just more of the same. It will not produce houses!

MR. MYER: That isn't a fair description at all. Mr. Woods doesn't say that rent control will produce houses. He says that, until enough housing units of the right kind are produced, there must be rent control.

Furthermore, the analogy with the workman isn't true at all. There is plenty of provision in the law as

it stands today for relief of landlords who are suffering hardship. And, as the figure shows, 73 per cent of those requested increases have been granted. They are being granted more and more. Any landlord who shows a real hardship, or a loss for that matter, can go into the area rent office and get an increase. So there isn't any of this need for crying about the situation and unfairness to the landlord.

Housing and Rent Control

MR. HUEBENTHAL: I think Mr. Woods' statement indicates that his concept of his job is to maintain price control rather than rent control. Now, I have looked up the word, *expedite*, in the dictionary, and I find it means this: "to hasten the progress of something by removing impediments." Now the word has a Latin derivation: *ex*, meaning out, and *ped*, meaning foot. May I suggest that an expediter is one who steps out to get something. A housing expediter should step out to get housing and more housing. In 1949 we realtors in the field of merchandising housing had the motto, "Step out and sell, or sell out and step."

Now, Mr. Housing Expediter, and I would say this whether his name was Woods or Jones or Stoopnagle, step out and get us some rental housing or step out, period.

MR. MYER: Well, I think Mr. Huebenthal has got something there when he talks about the meaning of expediter. The difficulty is that the only function that Congress has left, really, to the expediter is the control of rents. That, however, was supposed to be only one of the functions of his office. The other functions of his office were to see that we got some real housing in the way of a public works housing construction program. Now, that has been almost completely eliminated by failure to pass the necessary legislation. So, unfortunately, a man who should be an expediter has only one function left. That is the control of rents.

The people Mr. Huebenthal speaks for are precisely the ones who have

been keeping the clamps on Congress to prevent a low-cost, government-owned housing project. So they, themselves, are responsible for the fact that the housing expediter has only one function.

MR. HUEBENTHAL: We want more rental housing for rent for the people who want it.

Now, I make the statement that rent control, as it is being administered and has been administered since the close of the war, has done two things. It has subtracted from our supply of housing units. The United States Bureau of the Census reported in 1940 that we had 19 million dwelling units occupied by tenants. In 1947 that figure had dropped to 17 million—2 million units lost from the rental market. Owners of these properties had to sell, or chose to sell often to people who had to buy or who did not want to buy. Rent control means fewer apartments and houses for rent in America. Rent control means that it is harder for you and every home-seeking American to find a suitable place to rent. Why? Because rent ceilings drive rental housing off the market.

MR. BUCHANAN: I would like to take the first point of your general argument, Mr. Huebenthal, the actual situation with regard to rental units available. There are less available units now than in 1941? Am I misunderstanding your statement?

'More Per Foot Space'

MR. HUEBENTHAL: There is more per foot space for housing in this country today than there ever has been before. There is more now than there was in 1940—per person. And I think when you ask what the situation is, we have to consider that those who were lucky enough to be in a rental unit on a given day have spread out. Children have gone to school; others have married; young people have gone to war. But still the person who occupied premises in 1941 is there today, frozen in—which conversely freezes out those who want to get in.

MR. MYER: Now that's an interesting statement. It is based largely on a lot of statistics which were gathered by a man by the name of Usher, who has the peculiar thesis that there really isn't any housing shortage. He says the real trouble is that people are occupying more space than they ordinarily would, and that is the reason other people don't have enough space. And he has a lot of statistics which he thinks proves it.

No statistics are going to convince me, or anyone else, that black is white. The fact remains, as I know and everyone knows, that there isn't enough housing of the kind that the average person can rent.

MR. HUEBENTHAL: All right, if there isn't enough housing, how do we get more? I maintain rent control stifles the building of new apartments. And it does that for two reasons.

Every time rent control is due to expire certain groups whip up a propaganda campaign to extend it and always their drive includes the proposals to put ceilings back on the rental of new buildings, too. And that is a real threat.

Rents and Building Costs

In the second place, the other part of the story is that, considering today's high construction costs, rents on new buildings must necessarily be higher than the rents in apartments which are frozen on the 1941 level. Will investors pay 1949 prices for materials and 1949 wages for labor to create a product which will bring in a 1941 revenue or compete with the bulk of other properties at that figure?

MR. MYER: As to the first point, the thing that is keeping housing from being built is fear of future controls. Let me point this out, Mr. Huebenthal. I take it that you are in favor of the termination of controls on March 31st of this year when controls end. Suppose that were done. What assurance do you have that, if your program failed, there wouldn't be further controls in the future? You would have the same argument a year from now

if there wasn't any housing. You would say to us then that builders fear that perhaps controls will be reimposed later and therefore there hasn't been any building.

MR. HUEBENTHAL: Would you like to know what builders and investors in Chicago feel at the moment? Now, listen to this: The Building Commissioner of the City of Chicago in January, 1949 issued permits for only 4 new apartment units, 2 two-apartment flats! What a way to start a new year in a growing city of 3½ million apartment-hungry people. And in the metropolitan area of Chicago—91 towns, mind you—only two of them reported permits for apartment units. Bellwood 46 units and Skokie 12.

Controls Prevent Building?

MR. MYER: That leads to your second point, that rent controls prevent the building of additional housing units. That absolutely isn't true, has never been proved, and cannot be proved. New multiple unit dwellings are not being built today because private investors don't have enough confidence that within the next period of 20 years or so persons will be able to pay these exorbitant rents of \$150 for four rooms which these buildings are taking today. Therefore, private investors will not invest their capital on the hope that they can get their money back over a period of 20 years at today's exorbitant rentals. Therefore it is not the removal of controls, but it is government low-cost housing for moderate priced rental units that will solve the problem.

MR. BUCHANAN: Along that line, Mr. Huebenthal, do you believe that removal of rent control would tend to bring more housing and therefore relieve the situation?

MR. HUEBENTHAL: Rent control certainly is one of the road blocks to the construction of rental housing. We have never had a housing shortage in the United States. Before controls there never was a time that you couldn't go into any city, large or

small, and find a choice of apartments for rent for immediate occupancy. Sometimes the price was high; sometimes the price was low. But the housing, the rental housing, was always available. And we have shelter now as good as we have only because the tenants and C.I.O. did not use their political power to get their Congressmen to fix their rents for them.

The biggest addition, for instance, to rental housing in Chicago was made in 1927 when there were 27,000 new units built, compared to 910 in the city of Chicago in 1948.

MR. MYER: And immediately after 1927 the boom broke and the poor fellow who had invested his life savings in so-called gold bonds got nothing back. Now, that is what private industry did to solve the housing shortage. It won't happen again.

MR. HUEBENTHAL: Are you blaming the building industry for the depression which followed 1927?

MR. MYER: No, I am telling you the problem can be solved only on the basis of government-financed, low-cost housing.

MR. BUCHANAN: Although I think the subject of increased housing is somewhat pertinent, actually in this discussion I hope we can separate it somewhat from rent control.

I would like to ask you, Mr. Myer, do you believe we can keep rents stable when other costs are going up?

'Hidden Increases'

MR. MYER: Under the present rent control law I think there can be a reasonable amount of stability under its enforcement. There is ample provision in the law for the relief of hardship in those cases where there actually is a hardship on the part of the landlord. The law gives at least six or seven grounds for relief by increasing rents, and those are being exercised right away all the time.

In addition, there are a number of hidden increases which don't reflect themselves in the records anywhere

and which have substantially aided the landlords.

MR. BUCHANAN: What do you mean, "hidden increases"?

MR. MYER: By hidden increases I mean the following: First, there are no longer any vacancies, which used to be a substantial item in cutting the revenue of the landlord. There is now 100 per cent collection of rents. There are no more defaults in rents. There are now additional units in housing. Landlords are putting apartments in attics and basements and garages and other places where people ought not to have to live; and these are all additional revenue. There are bonuses, either in the way of fixing the landlord's apartment for him or an apartment in the building, or else in actual cash. There no longer is any substantial amount of decorating to be done by the landlord, and there are no longer any repairs. These are substantial items which increase revenue in a hidden way.

MR. HUEBENTHAL: That is fine, but let me point out this: Most of the rental units in this country are owned by small owners. Eighty-three per cent of the rent that is paid by tenants goes to landlords who have incomes under \$5,000.

MR. MYER: Well, the housing expediter has just come out with a new regulation making it even easier for the small property owner to get an increase. That is something for his benefit, and you don't mention that at all.

Position of Owner

MR. HUEBENTHAL: The small owner of property, for example, a two-flat owner, doesn't get a 10 per cent increase.

MR. MYER: When he had a vacancy, it was a 50 or 100 per cent vacancy which he doesn't have now at all; so his position is correspondingly even better.

MR. BUCHANAN: I think, in summary, gentlemen, we can say that Mr. Woods in his position as housing expediter asks not only for continuation of the law but a stronger law.

Mr. Huebenthal counters with the argument that removal of rent control would lead to the availability of more housing units.

'Must Have Rent Control'

While you, Mr. Myer, suggest that under present circumstances we must have rent control if the average person is to have a decent place to live.

WGN ANNOUNCER: Thank you, gentlemen. You have been listening to the Northwestern University Reviewing Stand discussion, *Our Housing Problem—Rent Control*.

Our guests today were Tighe Woods, National Housing Expediter; Fred B. Huebenthal, President of the Chicago Real Estate Board; and Meyer J. Myer, consultant on rent control for the C.I.O. and attorney for the Chicago Tenants Federation.

Now, our moderator, Robert Buchanan, will tell you about next week's program.

MR. BUCHANAN: Next week the Reviewing Stand examines the problem of adoptions. It's a subject that has received considerable attention from both press and radio of late. We'll discuss the problem of making adoptions safe—safe for the individuals involved—safe for society as a whole.

Our guests will be Leon Richman, director of the Jewish Children's Bureau of Cleveland; Professor William Byron of the sociology department at Northwestern University; Mrs. Miriam Elson, case worker for the Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society; and Miss Beth Muller, regional child welfare representative of the United States Children's Bureau. We invite you to listen next week for *Can We Make Adoptions Safe?*

Suggested Readings



Compiled by Laura R. Joost, Assistant,
Reference Department, Deering
Library, Northwestern University



HUNTER, CARRIE E. *State Rent Control Laws*. Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Legislative Reference Service (Public Affairs Bulletin, No. 62, Feb. 1948)

Analysis of statutory provisions of state rent control, including three 1946 laws that have expired, as well as laws currently on the books of nine states.

U.S. Congress. 80th Congress, 2nd Session, Public Law 464. Housing and Rent Act of 1948. Washington, D.C., U.S. Supt. of Documents, 1948.

Housing legislation, including extension of rent controls, in the 80th Congress.

U.S. Congress. 81st Congress, 1st Session, House of Representatives. HR1731 (some copies available through Congressmen).

Administration's bill to extend certain provisions of the housing and rent act of 1947, as amended. Introduced Jan. 24, 1949 by Mr. Spence.

U.S. Congress. 81st Congress, 1st Session, Senate. S 600. (Some copies available through Congressmen)

Counterpart of HR1731, introduced into Senate on Jan. 24, 1949 by Mr. Maybank.

Journal of Housing 6:40, Feb., '49. "Stronger, Longer Rent Controls Proposed—Hearings Underway."

Notes on rent control bills introduced into the 81st Congress.

Journal of Housing 5:61, March, '48. "Rent 'De-Control' Gradually Accomplished Under Rent Control." ABE GOTTLIEB.

Theorizes that rent control gradually becoming rent 'de-control' will tend to stabilize rents at a higher level.

New Republic 119:9, Nov. 29, '48. "Realtors Face Reality."

Indicates that in spite of the pressure from the realtors some sort of rent control will continue and that area-wide rent increases will be allowed only if landlords can prove hardship.

New Republic 120:16+, Jan. 3, '49. "Let's Look at the Lobbies." HELEN FULLER.

Among the lobbyist groups that Miss Fuller reports on, the real-estate

lobby—fighting legislation on housing, housing research and rent controls—seems to have lost none of its strength.

U.S. News 25:17, Nov. 26, '48. "Rent Control Pattern for 1949."

Notes on the administration's plans for rent control in 1949.

Year End Statement by TIGHE WOODS, National Housing Expediter for the *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec., 1948.

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Should We Change Our Economic System?

Vol. 12, No. 2

Do Cooperatives Endanger Other Business?

Vol. 12, No. 4

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| 5. The Supreme Court Decision on Religious Education. | 17. Do You Feel Your Age? |
| 6. Let's Look at Business. | 18. What's Happening in Southern Europe? |
| 7. Three Years After the War: How Do We Stand Now? | 19. What Can We Expect from the New Administration? |
| 8. What Can Adults Learn? | 20. World Government. |
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| 11. What Are We Doing about Inter-American Trade? | 23. How Much Does Worry Affect Our Lives? |
| 12. How Do We Stand on Housing? | 24. What Does China Face in the Future? |
| 13. Should We Have Federal Aid for Education? | 25. Christianity After 1948 Years. |
| 14. The Berlin Crisis. | 26. What's Ahead for Congress in 1949? |
| 15. How Important Is the Electoral College? | |

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| 1. Un-American Investigations—Red Herring or Needed Service? | 5. Should Our Government Provide Medical Care? |
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